Sea Power Didn't Win War; Futile Dream of Sea Power Lost It

Germany's Future Was Not on the Water but on Land, in Spite of the Kaiser

By William L. McPherson

SEA POWER did not win the world war. Yet the misuse of sea power lost it. This is a paradox which has troubled the extreme partisans of the Mahan theory. Mahan's contentions were vindicated, but in an inverse sense.

Sea power such as Germany had proved a millstone around her neck. It confused her strategy. It tempted her away from her safe and natural field of military effort. The continent of Europe was her true terrain, just as it was Napoleon's. Speaking broadly, she would have been better off in a military sense if she had had no navy.

"Germany's future lies on the sea," said William II in one of his expansive and vainglorious moments. No prophecy could have been more inept. No policy could be more dangerous for Germany than one which committed her to an effort to challenge Great Britain's mastery of the ocean. Germany's geographical position was an ideal one for conquests on land—for territorial expansion east and south. But it was almost prohibitive of sea empire.

Germany had risen to the rank of the first military power in Europe without the aid of a navy. Bismarck, Moltke, and the generation which vanquished Austria and France and created the empire would not have known what to do with a high seas fleet. They would have looked on it as a superfluity and an incumbrance.

Bismarck Disdained Oversea Empire

The illusion of German sea power took root in the brains of the post-Bismarckians. The Great Chancellor always trod the solid ground. He cared nothing for oversea colonies. He encouraged France to go into Tunis in 1881. He was glad to see the French committed to a policy of colonial expansion in Northern Africa. He believed that the acquisition of Tunis would help to reconcile France to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. He also foresaw that the extension of French power on the southern coast of the Mediterranean would incense Italy and drive her into an alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. But for himself he coveted no colonial establishments—no "place in the sun" for Germany beyond the limits of the European continent.

William II brusquely elbowed Bismarck off the stage and broke melodramatically with all the Bismarckian traditions. With a showman's instincts he turned to new ideas of imperial policy. Sea power was one of these. Germany was to enter the race for overseas trade and dominions. She was to have a great merchant marine, a great navy and new found African and Asiatic colonies.

German industry, making enormous strides under the protection of a semi-socialized government, responded eagerly to the new foreign programme. Germany, producing cheaply, had goods to sell, and a subsidized German merchant marine sprang up to carry them to all parts of the world. Dependencies were acquired in regions not yet preempted by other colonizing powers. The German flag was raised over the Cameroons, German West Africa, Togoland, German East Africa, New Guinea, Samoa, Kiao-chau and the Marshall Islands. France was badgered into surrendering a part of French West Africa in return for a quitclaim in Morocco. The creation of a modern navy followed the rapid and profitable development of the two great German sea transportation companies—the Hamburg-American and North German Lloyd.

Giving Hostages To Fortune

What the Kaiser and his advisers could not see was that their overseas expansion ran counter to true German military policy. If Germany was going to pursue the Prussian tradition of military conquest, her energies should have been concentrated for use along the lines of least resistance. Her natural enemies were France and Russia. Eastern and Middle Europe were marked out by nature for Teuton exploitation. To seek power and territory beyond the seas was only to give unnecessary hostages to fortune. For Germany could not expect to become a great colonizing nation, to maintain a world-wide carrying trade and, above all, to build a first class navy, without exciting the distrust and hostility of Great Britain. And in a European war in which Great Britain sided with Germany's enemies the latter's colonies would fall, her foreign trade would be suppressed and her navy would be either blockaded or extinguished.

Oversea expansion could not but weaken Germany's military position. It necessarily introduced and stimulated pacifist tendencies within a militaristic state. The more intelligent and practical leaders in the upbuilding of the German merchant marine could not but realize that Germany's future on the seas depended absolutely on the retention of British good will and on the preservation of peace.

In a letter written in December, 1917, by Albert Ballin, of the Hamburg-American Company, the greatest figure in the German shipping world, to Dr. Rathenau, the president of the General Electric Company and one of the leading German industrialists, a candid admission is made of the complete dependence of German overseas trade before the war on the favor of Great Britain. Says Mr. Ballin, who died just before the end of the war, having first lost the favor of his former friend and patron, the Kaiser:

Herr Ballin's Confession

"More than ever I must admit that every increase in our wealth, every success of our enterprises in the years preceding the war, were due to our relations with the British Empire. Its ports, its dominions and its colonies were largely opened to our fleets and our merchants. I have often been astonished at that generosity, which I even regarded as folly. Can one suppose that we shall ever restore those old relations? . . .

"We aspire to recover our overseas commerce. On that prospect we build the fondest hopes. But how can we recover it in the face of Anglo-Saxon unity, which hates, and ought to hate, our very presence? Do our imbeciles of chauvinists take account of the fact that we haven't even a port where our ships can dock or where they can receive a friendly greeting?

"Dover, Falmouth and Southampton, Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria, Aden, the Persian Gulf, Bombay, Colombo, Singapore and Hongkong—what are they? English arsenals, naval bases, coaling stations, docks where we shall not even dare to show our faces, if England forbids us to do so.

"It is the same all around the continent of Africa. It is the same in the West Indies. It is the same in the Pacific. We have not a single coaling station, not a single dock, where we can repair our vessels."

Britain's Long Indulgence

Ballin realized—long after it was too late—that German sea power had been only a peace-time fiction—a matter of indulgence on the part of Great Britain. The British were exceedingly tolerant of German rivalry. This "folly," as Ballin called it, was not due to any real consideration for Germany. It was only a phase of British self-complacency. The average British merchant had no aversion to using German freight carriers. He was willing to buy cheaper German goods and sell them at home and abroad under his own labels. There was no consciousness at all in Great Britain of a "German peril." The British public still put implicit faith in the diplomacy of Beaconsfield, the cardinal principle of which was to combat the influence and ambitions of Russia. German ambitions were not taken seriously.

The self-deception of many British statesmen about German purposes was extraordinary. Even down to August, 1914, leaders like Lord Haldane and Sir Edward Grey seemed unable to imagine that Germany would not alone provoke a European war, but would draw Great Britain into it. It was because of this singular fatuity that the British had to enter the war so deplorably unprepared.

The Kaiser and his advisers may have had some cause to think that British politicians would continue complacent while Germany was building up a powerful navy in addition to a prosperous merchant marine. But they misread history and misjudged the British character when they assumed that Great Britain would ever tolerate the use of the German navy to destroy the French fleet and to seize the French Channel ports. Such a challenge to their own naval superiority in Western European waters the British people would certainly meet, whatever their pacifist politicians thought. So the creation of a German navy strong enough to destroy French seapower inevitably paved the way to war with Great Britain.

"Der Tag" Impudence

If Germany intended to be a real sea power she would therefore have to count on locking horns, sooner or later, with the British. The officers of the German fleet knew this. They had their toast, "Der Tag," meaning the day when they expected to take Great Britain's measure on the seas. That sort of thing was magnificently impudent. But it was not war. A competent general staff would have vetoed as fantastic and suicidal the proposition to take Great Britain on as an additional enemy. And such a veto should have stood, whatever its effect on the Kaiser's inflated naval and colonial programme.

But after the elder Moltke's death German military policy became confused and unstable. The Kaiser's erratic influence was all-pervasive. He was an enthusiastic yachtsman. He was a big stockholder in the Hamburg-American and North German Lloyd companies. He wanted to create a tinsel colonial empire. He was eager to pose as war lord on the quarterdecks of battleships as well as at the head of divisions and armies. There is nothing to show that the general staff tried seriously to dissuade him from his mad adventure on the high seas—an adventure which could only dissipate German resources and weaken Germany's highly advantageous military position.

The military leaders humored the whims of the All Highest, whether from choice or from necessity.

Afraid to Cross The Kaiser

Within the High Command, as within every other governmental body, there was no true freedom of opinion. Only as late as 1917 did German military experts begin to feel a little freedom in discussing the gigantic blunder of German naval policy. In his "Deductions from the World War," published in that year of German military good fortune, Lieutenant General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, deputy chief of the German General Staff, indulges in these cautiously skeptical reflections:

"This is not the place to examine how far, in view of the all too rapid growth of her trade, world politics and world economics may have been premature in the case of Germany, inasmuch as our continental position was still by no means assured. Here Rancke's words are applicable: 'Who can control circumstances, calculate future events, govern the surging of the elements?'"

This is a veiled way of saying that William II's venture in sea power was a disastrous misjudgment. Von Freytag-Loringhoven also says: "As the result of our geographical position it will always remain our task to form a just estimate of the opposing demands of world economics in the narrower sense and of oversea and Continental politics."

The Surrender Off Scotland

But this author, characteristically obsequious, diplomatically gilds the pill by adding: "The World War affords incontrovertible proof that Germany must for all time to come maintain her claim to sea power. We need not at present discuss by what means this aim is to be achieved."

Empty and melancholy words! Hardly more than a year after they were written the greater part of the German high seas fleet was steaming across the North Sea to surrender to the Allies, and the German U-boats, the only units in the German navy which were able to keep the seas and to inflict real losses on the enemy, were being turned over *en masse* to the victors. The German navy struck its flag in November, 1918, without even fighting to save appearances. It was a fitting end to a preposterous military experiment.

But no one in Germany ever foresaw the tragic ceremony off the Firth of Forth. The strategists of the General Staff, who should have subordinated everything to securing Germany's Continental position, were silent while Admiral von Tirpitz pursued for two decades or more his task of fitting Germany for that "future" on the seas of which William II had boasted.

Tirpitz was, in a military sense, Germany's chief evil genius. A promoter and politician rather than a seaman, he worked for his own glorification and that of his caste. He won the confidence of the pan-Germans and the Junkers, who saw in his schemes only another easy way of boosting German military expenditures. He spent millions of marks organizing navy leagues in the interior of the empire and carrying back-district delegations to Hamburg and Bremen, where they were feted and infected with the big navy propaganda. He had the support of the big industrials and the exporting interests and became in time one of the "uncrowned kings" of the Prussian state, like Krupp, Thyssen, Heydebrand, Ballin and Rathenau.

Tirpitz the Promoter

Arrogant, imperious and narrow minded, he bestrode Germany like an uncouth colossus. A neutral traveller gave this glimpse of him in the latter part of the war. A train overcrowded with women, children and wounded soldiers is travelling from one German town to another. The disabled and suffering pack the compartments and the aisles. At one stopping place a spacious, locked compartment is opened and von Tirpitz issues alone—obese, whiskered, gorgeously uniformed and haughtily rigid. What was the comfort of any one else on that train compared with his comfort?

Tirpitz had his secret naval appropriations and his secret building programme. But there are no inviolable secrets in a matter like naval construction. The German navy, as planned by him, was soon to overtake and pass every other navy, except Great Britain's. The British government remained apathetic for a long time. But the point was eventually reached when the British standard of naval superiority—a fleet equal to that of any two other powers—was threatened by German construction.

British Suspicion Aroused

Great Britain finally protested and began negotiations with Germany for a mutual limitation of building programmes. The German Admiralty backed and filled, professing innocence of any intention to challenge British sea power. But no limitation agreement was ever reached. Thereafter Great Britain and Germany became potential enemies. However tinged with pacifism the Asquith-Haldane-Grey government might be, however slight attention it might pay to Lord Roberts's appeals for military preparation, British distrust of German naval ambitions had been aroused. Tirpitz had made it impossible for Great Britain to remain a spectator in any European war which Germany should precipitate.

German indignation when Great Britain joined France and Russia in 1914 was therefore petulant and insincere. The violation of Belgian neutrality furnished the Asquith government with a welcome moral issue on which to reverse its own policy of sluggish nonconcern. But even without the Belgian perfidy Great Britain would have been obliged to enter the war. Her own security compelled her to accept the opportunity offered to end the growing menace of German naval power.

Submarine Lawlessness

But Tirpitz was to involve Germany in still more costly military blunders. His surface fleet was swept from the ocean in the first months of the war. He found accidentally in the submarine an offensive weapon worth vastly more than his battleships and cruisers. Yet the use he made of the U-boat was senseless and disastrous. Smarting at the failure of his surface vessels to hold the seas, he resolved to drive all other surface shipping off them. It was a grandiose idea. Had Tirpitz succeeded he would have won the war. He would have won the war equally if he had been able to carry through his original plan to create a surface navy strong enough to cope with Great Britain's.

But both these ideas were fallacious. And the failure of the second scheme entailed more fatal consequences than the failure of the first one. Germany still had a chance to win a European war after Great Britain had joined France and Russia. But she had no chance at all to win a world war into which she had dogged the United States by persisting in her unrestricted U-boat operations. Tirpitz had his sufficient warning of the perils of high sea murder when he sank the Lusitania and raised a moral and legal issue with the United States. But nothing could deter him. He had become more than ever a visionary and a gambler. So, after contemptuously parleying for nearly two years with Washington, he began a war of piracy against all neutral shipping. This madness arrayed against Germany a power even more formidable than Great Britain. When reluctant America was converted into a belligerent Germany's last chance of victory disappeared.

The German public was slow to recognize the fatal effects of von Tirpitz's naval policy. But long before the end of the war the Kaiser found it advisable to make a show of sacrificing him to popular discontent. He was sidetracked, though the continuing effects of his blunders could not be sidetracked.

Captain Persius's Verdict

Even naval officers and critics turned against him. Captain Persius was the fairest and most competent of the German writers on naval affairs. He had been a booster of the big navy idea and of unrestricted submarine warfare. But he was finally disillusioned enough to write in the "Berliner Tageblatt":

"Herr von Tirpitz may be assured that all attempts to cover over his guilt will miserably fail. The German people will some day have a clear understanding of the situation, and then it will realize that the phrase which Kammerherr von Oldenberg-Januschau used with reference to Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg applies still better to Herr von Tirpitz: 'I believe that never has a minister done his country a graver injury than he.'"

Germany lost the war, therefore, because she had handicapped herself with naval power and then misemployed it. Had she had no navy or only a moderate sized coast defence navy she might not have had to fight Great Britain at all. She certainly would never have had to fight the United States. And since her true field of conquest was in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the lack of a navy could have made no difference whatever in her offensive strength.

Outside Mahan's Theory

Her case fell outside the scope of Admiral Mahan's theory that sea power is the necessary adjunct of empire. She needed merely enough warships to keep control of the Baltic and to assist her land operations against the Baltic provinces, Finland and the Petrograd district. The Baltic was closed by mines against the British fleet. The Black Sea was closed by the Dardanelles forts. Germany could therefore proceed in the East without any fear of hostile interference from Allied sea power.

Many writers have asserted that Allied sea power defeated Germany. But this claim entirely overlooks what the Germans went out of their way to do to defeat themselves. It is true that control of the sea made possible the transportation of the American armies to France; and American man power turned the scale in land fighting against Germany. But Germany would never have been obliged to fight the United States if she had had the sagacity to pursue a military policy dictated by her own strategical necessities and limitations.

The blockade, conducted with ever increasing rigor, greatly hampered the Teuton allies. But they had no reason to expect anything different. And they were in nothing like the desperate situation in which the Confederate states found themselves from 1861 to 1865. Germany was self-supporting, so far as the manufacture of war material was concerned. She had enough for her purposes. There was a shortage in food after 1915. But the Teuton people were never near the starvation point. The armies were always sufficiently supplied and lost nothing in fighting power by reason of shortened rations. And Germany constantly extended her territorial conquests, finally getting possession of the rich grain lands of Rumania and the Ukraine.

No Famine In Germany

Reports of alarming food shortages in the Central states filled the Allied press in 1915, 1916 and 1917. They were gross exaggerations, intended to keep up the spirit of the Allied publics. After 1917 people ceased to put any faith in them. Hunger would not have brought Germany to her knees in the fall of 1918 or broken the Teuton coalition if American man power had not arrived in Europe and the German armies had not been decisively beaten in Champagne, Picardy, Artois and Flanders.

The Allied blockade failed to starve Germany into submission, although it caused the enemy much annoyance and discomfort. Allied sea power was also unequal in preventing the attainment of what should have been Germany's primary strategical aim. That was the conquest and absorption of Russia.

The Allied fleets faltered at the Dardanelles in March, 1915. The Black Sea was never entered by French and British warships until after the armistice was signed.

Control of the sea enabled the Allies to deliver war material to the Russian armies through Kola, Archangel and Vladivostok. But the difficulties of land transportation from these ports to the eastern fighting front had still to be overcome. They were successfully overcome only for a short period in 1916.

Secondary Effects Of Blockade

Von Freytag-Loringhoven says very justly of the military effects of the blockade:

"The consequences of the blockade to which the Central Powers were subjected made themselves felt at once. Although we have succeeded by our own might in developing and carrying on our economic life during the war, none the less the disadvantages of our economic position in the world have made themselves felt all the time. They alone explain the fact that new opportunities of resistance constantly revealed themselves to our opponents, because the sea was open to them, and that victories which formerly would have been absolutely decisive and the conquest of whole kingdoms still brought us no nearer to peace. Thus was Russia able to recover from the severe defeats of the summer of 1915, and to attack once more in the following year with newly equipped armies."

But Brusiloff's Galician offensive of 1916 was the last flash in the pan of Russian fighting power. Allied control of the sea could not check the Russian disintegration. It could not prevent the elimination of Russia as a belligerent. And to hold Russia in line was the chief aim of Entente strategy, until the United States came in to replace Russia. Sea power was therefore an important contributing element to Allied strength. But it could never have decided the war in the Entente's favor if the war had retained its strictly European character.

The development of the submarine has greatly complicated the problem of the sea strategists. There is some talk among them of trying to get the Paris peace conference to put a ban on the submarine. But it would be just as reasonable to try to put a prohibition on the use of long distance guns of the "Big Bertha" type, or of bombing airplanes. All these instruments of destruction render more or less precarious the guarantees thrown about the lives of non-combatants by the rules of civilized war as they existed before 1914. But the character of war itself has changed. It has become more terrible. It has now been so intensified as to obscure the old distinctions between combatants and non-combatants. Armies no longer fight armies; nations fight nations.

If wars are to continue it would be against human nature and against all military experience to expect belligerents to forego the use of any of the means of destroying the power of the enemy which this war has developed. So the U-boats will undoubtedly remain a highly disturbing factor in naval warfare and surface fleets will have to fight for existence against the giant submarines of the future. This war's effects on sea power will probably be more revolutionary than its effects on land power. The weaker sea powers may be benefited, relatively, at the expense of the stronger.

Builded for Defeat, Not Victory

But Germany entered the war with no clear idea of using the strength of her U-boat squadrons as an offset to the weakness of her surface fleet. The development of the submarine was an afterthought. Tirpitz lavished hundreds of millions of marks on battleships and battle cruisers. With these he intended to make the North Sea a German lake—justifying the nomenclature of the old geographers, who used to call it the German Ocean.

He overlooked the fact that in surface sea fighting under modern conditions inferiority is fatal. A weaker army, favored by accidents of position, may easily defeat a stronger army. But on the sea there is no advantage of position. The inferior squadron or fleet rarely wins and is always lucky to escape destruction. Off Jutland the German navy was clearly beaten, though low visibility conditions allowed it to slink back to port. Its next appearance in the open was for the purpose of surrendering.

Tirpitz had builded for defeat, not for victory. His naval policy was radically wrong. Sea power is a long, slow growth. And of all the belligerent nations of the first rank Germany was the least qualified in a military sense to engage in a war at sea. Her future lay elsewhere. And she would probably have made it secure if she had only followed from the beginning the modest but adequate naval policy of Austria-Hungary, her lightly esteemed neighbor and ally.

CREATOR OF GERMAN FLEET AND CHIEF TO WHOM IT SURRENDERED

Grand Admiral von Tirpitz

Admiral Sir David Beatty

Surrender of German Fleet Fitting Climax of Mistaken Naval Policy

Albert Ballin, leader in the development of the German mercantile marine, who too late confessed the folly of challenging the sea power of Great Britain.